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ABSTRACT

The alternative school provides a specific institutional discourse, official and unofficial, that shapes the ways in which alternative school students participate in a particular discursive practice. The alternative school plays a crucial role in developing students' aspirations by enabling them to envision a better future. Moreover, it helps students make and remake their constructions of self, as their life stories are recontextualized through alternative school experiences. This paper focuses on the way a student's alternative school experience stimulates his or her reflections on past experiences (i.e., mainstream school experiences and street experiences). It also examines how particular discourses of alternative schools (re)shape and (re)arrange a student's memories. The author explores how students continuously (re)construct their stories of mainstream school experience and their street life in light of alternative school experience. (Contains 24 references.) (Author)

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*Re*Collecting Memories, *Re*configuring Identities, *Re*reinforcing Class Inequality: Schooling Stories of Alternative High School Students in South Korea

by

Jung-ah Choi

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INTRODUCTION

I taught classes in an alternative high school in Seoul, South Korea (hereafter Korea), in the summer of 1999 and fall of 2000. This school accommodated students who had been dismissed from mainstream school primarily for behavioral reasons such as truancy, bullying, and violence. This alternative school was distinguished from regular mainstream schools in Korea in terms of school policies and regulations, organization, resource distribution, peer relations, teaching practices, thereby generating *alternative* culture, climate, and norms. Students attending this alternative school shared homogeneous demographic characteristics such as low academic achievement and family poverty. These students –as returnees—experienced being both in and out of (or in and against) school, both in mainstream and alternative school systems. While I taught in the alternative school, I had the opportunity to hear how and why they left mainstream school and returned to the alternative school, and what they experienced between schools. These stories told by alternative school students provided me with the impetus to conduct this research. In this paper, I focus on these student narratives on their schooling experiences in order to examine the role of alternative schooling from the perspective of students' identity construction.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The alternative school provides a specific institutional discourse, official and unofficial, that shapes the ways in which alternative school students participate in a particular discursive practice. The alternative school plays a crucial role in developing students' aspirations by enabling them to envision a better future. Moreover, it helps students make and remake their constructions of self, as their life stories are recontextualized through alternative school experiences. This paper pays particular attention to the way in which students' alternative school experiences stimulate their reflections on their past experiences (mainstream school experience

and street experience), and the way in which the alternative school's particular discourses (re)shape and (re)arrange their memories. I explore how students continuously (re)construct their stories of mainstream school experience and their street life in light of alternative school experience.

Theoretically, this study incorporates critical educational tradition into an ethnographic research methodology (Anderson, 1989). Critical education studies have argued that schools regulate and reify social divisions, maintain cultural hegemony, and perpetuate inequality. These critical theories and ethnographies, which have flourished in the U.S. (Apple, 1982; Foley, 1990; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; McLaren, 1986; Ogbu, 1994; Weis, 1990) and in other western countries (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Whitty, 1985;Willis, 1977; Young 1971), offered the framework within which schooling is conceptualized and my data are theorized/analyzed. My investigation, however, extends beyond these studies by privileging a contextualized approach to students' narratives. In considering the narratives of their life-long struggles over schooling as revealing interactions and negotiations with social and ideological forces, and considering schooling as a part of the process of self-formation rather than as a mechanism of social reproduction, this research shows how alternative school students – former dropouts-- continuously react to social ideologies and negotiate their identities.

Grounded on critical educational theories, this study explores how alternative school students enact cultural meanings at the intersection of multiple discourses and practices. School stories reveal the way alternative school students fashion their identities. My study pays particular attention to how alternative school students – as former dropouts-- develop social identities in the highly stratified Korean society, and how their identities are formed and reformed in response to institutional, cultural, and ideological forces. I bring students' stories to the body of literature on identity construction, raising the question of whether the alternative school serves to reproduce social stratification and, if so, how. The existing studies that address conceptions of schooling have tended to explore the role of *mainstream schools*; however, this study poses the

question, " What about *alternative schools*?" The purpose of this study is to investigate how the alternative school students recollect, recall, and reconstruct the stories of their previous school experience and street life, with the goal of illuminating the role of alternative school in identity formation and its relation to schooling.

FIELD SITE & METHODOLOGY

The data are derived from my ethnographic field research conducted at SaeGil High (a pseudonym, SGH hereafter), one of the alternative high schools in Seoul, Korea. SGH is mandated to serve those who were expelled from mainstream school or were unable or unwilling to return to the mainstream school system. Admission of SGH is nonselective geographically, academically, and age-, gender, class-wise. As the official policies read, "whoever wishes to receive high school education can come and learn," the school has no selection criteria in accepting students. Most of the students enrolled themselves voluntarily (returnees), but others were referred to SGH (transfer students).

SGH accommodates youths' street culture and school culture, so that both those who are still involved in the street culture and those who determined themselves to be good students fit in SGH. The school's unstructured organizations, loose regulations, absence of innovative programs, and teachers' low academic expectations, all promote freedom and autonomy within student culture (Choi, 2001). In particular, SGH has lenient regulations for student behaviors, which produces undisciplined school behaviors. Chronic truants are condoned under loose policy. Students' attendance fluctuates, and about one third of the students who are enrolled do not attend school after enrollment. Those who were expelled from mainstream school for 30 days' absence (truancy) can stay in SGH with the same days' absence. Those who were severely punished for smoking are allowed to smoke in the SGH school building.

Due to limited funding, the school building and facilities are in physical disrepair. The whole area within the building is about one tenth as large as mainstream schools. There is no

playground. There is no school gate which marks the school boundary, and the school building borders right on the sidewalk. The architectural structure looks like a private institute which is running out of business. This shabby building makes visitors suspicious to think, "Is this a school, or a private institute?" Without the school name sign on the building, it would be hard for people to recognize it as a school. Since there is no playground belonging to this school, when all students need to convene for a graduation ceremony, they rent a nearby school's playground or the community's stadium. The single restroom is smelly and is used by both teachers and students.

SGH is one of the non-traditional schools which do not belong to the Korean Ministry of Education. SGH is categorized as "accredited nonformal education facility and school," (Ministry of Education) and "alternative school," is my translation of this term. SGH occupies the bottom tier of Korean school system. As of 1999, there are thirty-eight accredited nonformal education facilities and schools nationwide eight of which in Seoul only (Ministry of Education). Alternative schools do not conform to the law enacted by the Ministry of Education in terms of enrollment size, regulations, architecture, facility, curriculum, teacher recruitment, etc. These schools are not provided with the same amount of government financial support as mainstream schools. The manner through which SGH's funding is obtained informal, i.e., from social workers, through campaigns, or special fund-raising events. The principal himself works tirelessly to raise enough money to keep the school running.

SGH serves the same function as traditional high schools in the sense that it has a credentializing function. As its classification under an "accredited nonformal facility and school" indicates, SGH gives out accredited high school diplomas. The fact that a graduation certificate issued by SGH is accredited as high school diploma means that SGH graduates can go on to college just as those who graduate from mainstream high schools.

I conducted a participant-observation ethnographic research at this school, working as an English teacher. I worked intensively with about one hundred students, both male and female. I

taught them in class and had more personal and informal conversations with them in cafeteria. My Korean ethnicity/nationality benefits my research regarding interpretation of phenomena, as well as facilitating access to the school and establishing a rapport with students and teachers at SGH. I interviewed over fifty students while I stayed at SGH, and ended up selecting five key participants for in-depth interviews. Primary data for this study are derived from in-depth interviews with these five students in SGH. These key participants had the following commonalities: (a) expulsion from their mainstream schools for their violations of school rules and policies, (b) experience of the street life such as running away from home, gang involvement, or drug abuse, after leaving mainstream school, (c) inability or unwillingness to return to mainstream school, and (d) successful school lives after returning to the alternative school. I collected students' life stories concerning their schooling experiences in order to examine how they made sense of their past in light of the present. I collected observational data about cultural practices of SGH students. Additionally, I interviewed a dozen of mainstream school students and teachers, and examined policy documents which helped me understand how policy shapes mainstream and alternative school practices.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SAEGIL HIGH

> I quit [mainstream] school one year ago because teachers beat me a lot [for my not obeying school regulations], and had no intention to return. One day, my aunt (with who he has lived after his parents got divorced) said that there is a school that is very different from typical schools [mainstream schools]. Initially, I insisted not going to school for a while, but my aunt implored me that I should visit the school just once and then decide. So, I came here with my aunt to look around school environment, and saw students with make-up, red hair, hip-hop jeans, and tatoo. I was like "Wow! This school exists?" I readily decided that I wanted to go to this school [SGH].

This above excerpt is taken from an interview with Hyonsik who enjoyed SGH's loose regulations. Hyonsik was engaged in youths' street culture (e.g., school gang), because of which he could not survive in mainstream school. After he was expelled from school, he spent one year on the street. When he was informed of SGH's liberal policy, he was able to quickly decide to

attend SGH. Beside Hyonsik, other students comment on school's loose regulations as a reason for returning. To Mingyu, who found himself not fit to the mainstream school's strict rules and regulations, SGH was the perfect school. Apparently, Mingyu liked SGH's liberal policy. Mingyu jokingly said, "This school is just up to my level." Through students' narratives, their extolment about SGH's liberal policies is revolving around. Indeed, SGH's innovative environment set apart from mainstream schools, gives an explanation to why these students who were rejected by the school system successfully manage their school life in SGH. Most of the interviewees expressed their comfortable feelings about being in SGH where their youth culture (disruptive behavior in school), once disdained by mainstream teachers, is acknowledged and accepted. SGH acknowledges, and even legitimates youths' social world.

Most SGH students felt grateful to SGH, as well as enjoyed school policies. This grateful feeling is tied with their past experience of rejection. Many of them experienced rejections by mainstream schools or other institutions, before they came to SGH. Since, they experienced difficulties in being admitted by mainstream institutions but SGH, they expressed deeper respect to the principal who rescued them from struggling with a GED, or from being insulted in the mainstream schools. Their gratitude to SGH is based on criticism of mainstream school. As Fraser et al. (1997) argue, institutionally marginalized students distance themselves from previous school and embrace certain features of the alternative school. A significant number of SGH students were impressed with SGH's nice teachers[1] , comparing them with mainstream school teachers:

> This school's teachers are like angels. You know how mean mainstream school teachers are? They disparaged people like me. They outrightly said, "you guys are garbage. No good. Our school does not need you." Plus, they beat us when they are in the mood to beat someone. But, here [at SGH] teachers are fair. When they spank, I never think that they do spank out of mere temper.

[1] They used fairness as criteria of a nice teacher, and used discrimination and favoritism as criteria of a bad teacher. Nice teacher does not imply overindulging students.

Most SGH students' narratives reveal that they were alienated from teachers' caring, and thus they were especially impressed with SGH teachers' warmth. At the same time, SGH students' hatred toward mainstream school teachers was often sharpened as they experienced SGH teachers. In particular, several students who had to drop out after fighting with a teacher, expressed their antagonistic feeling to teachers. Yongwoo, who dropped out after beating up his teacher, compare both schools' teachers:

> In regular [mainstream] schools, I saw a lot of corporal punishment with no reason. When I was in a regular school, some teachers beat us just because they were in downmood. Some teachers beat all of us when just one student talked loud in class under the spirit of group discipline. Some teachers slapped us with no reason. How obnoxious they were! Those customs are really preposterous.

By and large, SGH students make a positive evaluation of SGH by appreciating liberal policies, and/or by expressing gratitude. However, their positive evaluations turn to shame when they compare themselves with mainstream public school students. This shame on SGH are associated with stigmatized images of SGH, such as a place of low rank (bottom tire of schools), low reputation, and students known as *pariah* crowd. Woogi commented, "When I say that I attend SGH, they [mainstream school students] all know what kind of school SGH is and ridicule me." SGH's institutional position push them to think that they are still categorized as bad students.

Architecture is a primary place where their disappointment, shame, and stigma are embodied. Bora and many others express their shame for the poor condition of the school building:

> I was hesitant to enroll in this school because I was so disappointed with the school's shabby appearance. I was expecting the school building to look like a school. But, [looking around the school building] Look, this is like a private small institute. Upon seeing this, my mom was very disappointed and initially discouraged me from attending this school. My mom said, "Is this really a school with no playground?" Especially in the physical education class we have to walk for about fifteen minutes to the playground.[the playground which belonged to a nearby school]

The comment on the school building or facility was most often heard during interviews. Not a single student missed this line of negative comment on the school's shabby look and poor facility.

A shameful feeling toward SGH reflects shameful feelings about themselves. Students often commented that when they hang out with "regular school" friends, they feel small and ashamed about themselves. Some students try to go to a college in order to hide their high school name [SGH]: "I will definitely go on to college because I want to hide a shameful high school name beneath the college education on my resume." Some did not tell their parents that they attend SGH; instead, they pretend as if they attend a mainstream school. Their frustration creeps in when they are conscious of their being older for the same grade level students. Most of them are ashamed of being in lower grade for the same age group, which is manifested in the comment: "I don't contact my friends who I knew at my previous school. They are now high school seniors whereas I am still a sophomore."

Students' reactions to SGH are mixed. Positive perceptions of comfort with lenient policies and generous teachers are prevalent among SGH students. However, at the same time, negative perceptions such as disappointment and shame are also evident. SGH students do not always maintain positive perceptions of SGH, and thus their positive sense of student self is unstable. Their shameful feelings are witnessed in the midst of their expressions of gratitude. Yunju, a female student, shows great thanks to SGH principal. Her gratitude is special because she found SGH while she was in the middle of despair and lack of hope for a GED (She believed that attending class in SGH is much easier than getting a GED). In her remarks that "I am happy with this school and deeply thankful to this school, although this school is not a real school," it is apparent that she clearly acknowledged that SGH was not a school in an official sense. In a similar vein, Woogi is grateful to the friend who introduced SGH to him. However, he said, "I wanted to get out of this pseudo school [referring to SGH] and wanted to go to a mainstream high school after graduating from SGH middle school." Hyonsik's words, "Although I am in a half-school-half-not school, I am still proudly reminding my dad that I go to school." The quotes above such as Woogi's label of SGH as pseudo school, Yunju's attribution of it as "not real

school," Hyonsik's perception of SGH as "half-school-half-not school," indicate that although they are grateful to SGH, they do not fail to forget SGH's low institutional status.

SGH students' mixed emotional response of pride and shame is also manifested in their comments about teachers. Most of them liked SGH teachers, none of whom harassed, mistreated, ignored students; however, on the other hand, they did not fail to recognize that teachers' tolerance and indulgence was not so much an evidence of love and dedication as an evidence of their giving up on the hope to educate them. Several students remark: "I think that teachers here sympathize with us. They know well that we do not go anywhere else if we are kicked out of here. They try to accept any behaviors." SGH students take pride in having nice and encouraging teachers; however, they acknowledge that teachers' leniency somehow means that teachers have given up on them.

These ambivalent, complex, and contradictory perceptions of SGH enable students to develop ambiguous identity of studenthood. Their identities as alternative schoolers are intersected with their past life stories. The past experiences shape the present perceptions of the school; however, I highlight the aspect that past stories are reconstructed in accordance with the present experience. SGH is not simply a physical space for recruiting participants, but it is an ideological and political space in which a particular youth culture is performed. Their value systems are continuously contested and negotiated in this ideological/political space according to the way in which they participate in various discourses. The next section aims to discuss internal mechanisms of SGH in order to examine how SGH facilitates specific ways of students' recalling the past. To say blatantly, SGH plays a crucial role in shaping their memories about their life before enrolling in SGH. The section that follows will take a closer look at how their story telling is re-constructed in relation to the SGH's schooling practices.

CULTURAL/EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES OF SAEGIL HIGH

The most notable SGH practice was students' undisciplined behavior, and teachers' generosity to student youth culture. Talking among themselves, listening to headphones, playing electronic games, fixing hair, putting on make-up, and using cellular phones, were common activities found in SGH classrooms. There was remarkable truancy -they tended to skip school on a whim. Skipping one or two days a week is so normal that they do not even explain to the teachers the reason why they did so. Students' regular attendance was complimented because absenteeism was so common in SGH, as was tardiness, which contrasted with mainstream schools where absence was graded only on a punitive basis. SGH students were glaringly conspicuous in terms of their physical appearances. Both female and male students were conscious of their appearance, adorning themselves with jewelry, make-up, and the latest fashions. They had high hip sensibilities, imitating their favorite television stars. They competed with each other in terms of who owns more expensive commodities. A considerable number of students had cellular phones, *autobi*, brand-named commodities in their effort to imitate the image of a cool guy shown in Korean popular culture. TV dramas, movies, and youth magazines, which ceaselessly push consumption of masculinity/femininity onto young ladies/guys (Fine, 1991) were prevailing and popular. SGH students were vulnerable to adopting prevalent consumption culture, which made them pursue materialist values.

It seemed that SGH students' frequent absences, privileging friends over teachers' precepts, and poor school behaviors, indicated neither students nor teachers at SGH care about school. However, students' tenacious effort to graduate was impressive. "Graduation" (for earning a diploma) was the primary goal among students at SGH. Students were keenly aware of the factors that affect graduation: attendance and taking exams. Their obsession on a diploma was evidenced by an exam day. They have school administered exams twice a year: midterm and final exams. Their practice of taking exams appears as odd as classroom behaviors. On the exam day, all of a sudden, students filled the classroom. They ran short of desks and chairs. Students

were making a fuss to borrow pencils before the exam. Although they do not care about exam grades[2], they are aware of the importance of taking exams because without them they are not supposed to move to the next grade level.

While students put forth great efforts to graduate, the teachers' efforts for preventing students from dropping out of SGH were equally impressive. Observing the teachers' room during recess revealed such a concern. Teachers went to great lengths to help students make it through graduation, and they counseled students who did not intend to graduate and teach them the importance of schooling. Teachers did not pass over students' long absences because they directly affect whether or not they can graduate. They were alert to the number of students' absences all the time. Mr. Son, for example, made phone calls to absent students every day. He had to make about 20 calls a day to persuade them to come to school the next day. One female teacher pleaded with students to come to school. Another teacher presented a different view: "I think it is not an effective way to force them to return to school by calling them. I'd rather just wait for them to return by their own choice. I give a call just before the student is on the verge of being expelled because of his/her absences." The week before the exam week, teachers were busy calling students, informing them of the exam, and confirming the importance of the exam. It seems that the teachers' job was primarily to keep track of students' attendance; teaching class seemed their secondary job.

It should be noted that SGH students' anti school behavior did not mean that they did not care about school. SGH students and teachers were keenly conscious of graduation requirements because they care about credential. This belief is reflected in typical teachers' admonishment: "You have to be equipped at least with the school credentials. Otherwise, it would be difficult for you to be employed even at McDonald's." In Korea, having a diploma is a way to follow normative life course, since over 99% of students obtain a diploma.

[2] Exams are not incentives that stimulate SGH students into studying. I noticed that the day before the exam nobody studied or worried about the exam.

Teachers at SGH were more permissive and tolerant to student behavioral problems than mainstream school teachers. However, teachers at SGH were not so dissimilar to mainstream schools in the sense that they try to teach the importance of school (school credential), compliment the students who try to study hard, compliant to teachers. They discouraged students' disrespectful manners and belittled them as immature students. Teachers categorize "mature" students as those who tried to be compliant to the institutional/social norms of being a good student; immature students as those who are recalcitrant.

SGH teachers' educational position was observed in conversations with new comers. SGH teachers often reminded new students that SGH gives out diplomas when they make it through graduation. Teachers seldom pried into the students' past misbehaviors, because they believed that the important thing is what they will do in the future. In class or during teachers' counseling, teachers often give such advice as, "It's not too late. Better late than never." Teachers valued their changed attitude, as one of teachers at SGH emphasized their educational philosophy:

> Our students have gone through ups and downs although they are still young. They know what is right and wrong by now. You [referring to me] may think that our students are still problem students, unruly, rebellious, but the very act of their returning evidenced their new determination. They were as corrupt as they came, and now they came to their senses and returned to school. Without new minds, they would not have returned to school.

Teachers tried their best to give hope to students, and praise the very act of returning to school. Teachers' message is summarized in these words: "If you become a good student by divesting yourself of your past attitude, you will get a high school diploma and go to college. Nothing hinders you whatsoever." Obviously, this sounds encouraging to students. However, as I will argue in the following section, this *flawless* educational advice tapped into ideologies that are lurking in alternative schooling. The next section will scrutinize, through student retrospective accounts, this subtle and hidden ideology of alternative schooling.

RECALLING THE PAST

> "I don't understand myself 'how come I did such stupid things!' I deeply regret dropping out, discretionless decision."
> "If I had been more thoughtful of my future, I would not have left school."

Previous literature on dropouts illustrates that dropouts defy or at least do not acknowledge school value. However, my data suggest that the majority of alternative school students (former dropouts) blame themselves and even internalize the blame for their neglect of school. Their comments on dropping-out and the street life such as "I was immature," "I lost my senses," or "I dropped out thoughtlessly," reveal that they undervalue or even disparage the worth of their past experiences.

At SGH, regret is interpreted as sign of a good student, because regret comes with a determination to become a good student. Yongwoo, who was known as the best student (motivated student) among other SGH students, painfully regretted his past as shown in his anger to me(the researcher who pried into his past), "I don't want to talk about it [what I did in the past]. Don't judge me by what I did before." Bora, another motivated student, repeatedly said, "I was stupid. I was so stupid that I left school." Bora and Yongwoo emphasized their new self. They now understand that they have to keep attendance, wear school uniform, avoid getting into fights in school, and comply with policies and teacher's instructions. The majority of students at SGH, although at varying degrees, have gone through value transformation in the period between leaving mainstream school and coming back to school.

It is an interesting paradox to discover that the more regret they have, the better students they are; or, to reverse, the more compliant students are to social norms, the more regretful they are for having dropped out; the more they think of the future, the more they regret their past. As above excerpts show, Bora and Yongwoo, good students and as teachers' pets at SGH, bitterly regretted their having left school and felt ashamed of their past doings. By contrast, Mingyu and Hyonsik, who enjoyed SGH's liberal policies, showed little regret on having dropped out.

Ironically, these motivated students were less satisfied with SGH. Those who had a firm determination for rehabilitation tended to show disappointment with SGH teacher's low expectations and the lack of an academically oriented atmosphere. Bora, for example, expressed her wish to attend a school where she could have received more rigorous education. According to her:

> When I enrolled in this school, I strengthened my determination 'I will study hard and I will go to college.' For the first a couple weeks I started studying and I tried not to be distracted by clothes. But the environment did not allow me to do so. If I was not wearing like other people I would be ostracized. You [referring to me] know this school students right? This school atmosphere got me automatically into fashion. Because of peer pressure about fashion, I could not avoid it.

Bora commented that her dream was dissipated as time went by. She complained of SGH environment; however, her complaints quickly turned to self-blame: "It's all my fault. If I had kept good attendance in previous school [mainstream school], I wouldn't have to be here. I think I should be grateful to SGH." Yongwoo, highly motivated, thought that he would be able to adjust to be in mainstream school. As such, he was not attracted by SGH's lenient policy and teachers: "I like teachers who are strict. I don't like teachers who are like 'I don't care if you guys are absent or not' I think those teachers are irresponsible or cowardly." Yongwoo blamed teacher's loose classroom management and weak focus on academic development. However, he soon added that "It's all because of me. I am not blaming them. I am *not* saying that teachers here are doing something wrong. This school is established for dropouts, so teachers here are doing the right thing." Whenever SGH students wanted to complain about SGH, they attributed all these unsatisfactory environment to himself, reasoning "I deserve this school because I was expelled from a mainstream school." In this way, even those who thought of SGH as not educationally helpful maintained a positive evaluation of SGH and were even grateful to SGH.

While SGH did not give a new start to those who regretted dropping out and undervalued the past experience, SGH provided a highly satisfactory educational environment to those who did not regret dropping out. Those who were categorized immature students tend to be satisfied

with SGH, which provided the institutional context where their youth behaviors were legitimized. Different peer relations, i.e., homogenous grouping, resituate them in the way to allow the behaviors in this particular community otherwise to be punished. Mingyu remarked: "[before I came to SGH] I thought I was extremely bad but I realized that I am moderately bad in terms of behavior. Here in this school, there are some who went to the juvenile detention more times than I did." Although these students were aware that their behavior, fashion and values were not legitimized/accepted as appropriate student behavior, they were able to rationalize and justify their culture in SGH, which protected them from punishment.

To reiterate, self-blaming regret is prevalent among the students who were determined to be good students and were regarded as such by teachers. What specifically do they regret? The causal relationship between returning to SGH and their regret requires more careful analysis. It can be that they returned to SGH because they regretted their dropping out and have a new determination. Or, it can be that they regret their dropping out after they came to SGH. Note Soyon's comments:

> When I heard of SGH, I was very excited thinking that I could be a student again. I thought that I could attend a real school. However, all my anticipations were gone when I saw the school building. I was astonished to see no playground for this school. I envy those who attend a regular school because they did not have to walk 15 minutes to have PE class. Walking fifteen minutes to a nearby school playground gives them reflexive thought of their mainstream school. I was thinking to myself: "I had to attend this kind of school *because* I was a *pariah*. And I know that I am not in the position to complain of this environment because it's all my fault.

It was not until after Soyon saw the shabby school architecture with no playground, the old school facility, and the smelly restroom that she began to regret her past doings. SGH students' regrets were newly created or deepened after returning to SGH when they realized the status of SGH. Their image of a bad student is embodied in the shabby school facility, school's low reputation, and their old age (late-learners).

They regret the fact that dropping out was not recoverable: The mainstream schooling opportunity is something that they lost and cannot gain back forever. That is, the reason their

regret grows involved with SGH's institutional status. As they know that they are not able to return to the mainstream school, they face daily the reminder of being marginal students. The regret of dropping out of a mainstream school was not eradicated after returning to SGH, rather it was deepened and intensified. Although the teachers encouraged students to make effort for their future, ironically, such advice made students reflect on their dropping out and regret it all the more. Contrary to teachers' promise that students can have a fresh start with divesting themselves of the drop-out identity, it seems that their placement itself was a marker of previous failure. SGH was not the institute that let students obliterate past experiences and start a new school life. Their poor facility, low reputation, and teachers' low expectations constantly reminded SGH students that they were formerly dropouts. In addition, SGH had no system that allowed them to skip the grade level. That means that they were always late learners no matter how hard they worked, no matter how strong their determinations were. In such a system, mainstream ideology is lurking in this alternative school. SGH rhetorically compelled students to gain a new identity, however, it did not enable them to do so.

SGH is portrayed as different picture by students who were considered as immature. While SGH environment known as a "pariah crowd" place was detrimental to those who wanted to rehabilitate their student life, it provided an optimal niche to those who enjoy *pariah* culture. They are aware that SGH is known as a school which allows students to smoke, and known as a school for *pariah*. This indicates that their happiness in SGH was obtained by identifying themselves with the pariah. SGH may reinforce pariah identity by institutionally legitimizing it. Students' penchant for SGH, based on immaturity or acquiescence of their pariah identity, obscures their possible critical stance toward their dropping out.

Both mature and immature students reasoned that "I am now in this low-ranked school because I was expelled from mainstream school for misbehavior," and "I deserve being in SGH for my mistakes". Unlike teachers' persistent precept that SGH cares only about students' future, SGH does not give betterment to either of these students. Alternative school students' self-blame

and identification with second-rate students helped them justify their institutional placement (being in an alternative school). These feelings are often accompanied by lowered self-esteem, resignation, frustration, and fatalism. Given that, alternative school students possibly develop inferiority feelings and low self-esteem ad internalize their low status. This, arguably, helps maintain social stratification. If social inequality is reinforced through school, such inequality, arguably, can be *re*reinforced through an alternative school. What SGH provides is only to help them re-assert their bottom class identity by providing bottom-tire educational institution.

CRITICISM OF SCHOOLING OR CRITICISM OF SELF

SGH students, both mature and immature, develop critical perspectives of the mainstream school to a certain extent *after* coming to SGH, as they compare things in SGH with those in the mainstream school. Once they met "nice" teachers at SGH, they started criticizing mainstream school teachers (see Fraser, et at 1997). The comparison of SGH teachers with their previous teachers naturally led them to criticize the latter. Some criticized not only particular teachers but also the educational system of the mainstream school such as mainstream school's policy, organization, curriculum, etc. Mingyu complained about mainstream schools which had so many unnecessary rules, regulations, ceremonies, and rituals. These critical voices illuminated structural features of the mainstream school system. SGH rendered these voices to be heard: If they had not met nice teachers at SGH, they might not have been able to criticize the mainstream school's arbitrary discipline practices. One student said, "I didn't know there are good teachers until I came to this school." SGH's organizational freedom, and teachers' low demands sharpened such critical perspectives. SGH provided a safe place to talk about negative aspects of mainstream school and legitimized such criticism. Furthermore, SGH facilitated such critical voices against mainstream school.

Oftentimes, students attribute their failure to mainstream school practices such as rigid curriculum, bureaucratic-oriented teachers, and strict punitive regulations. While SGH students

reproached both themselves and the school practices, they developed contradictory feelings similar to those revealed by American suburban dropouts: "There are lots of things wrong with school. It didn't work for me, but I should have been able to cope (especially because most of those around me coped.)" (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1991, p.287). As SGH failed to mobilize their political voices to a political movement, it indirectly conveyed the message that dropping out was attributable to the individual student. On the contrary, SGH muffled critical voices against mainstream school. Note Yongwoo's story. After returning to SGH, Yongwoo forgave (was able to forgive) the mainstream school teachers who had kept harassing him. He remarked, "It's all over. My hostility, anger, rage are fading away. I just want to forgive them because I became different than what I was." In Mingyu's case, negative perceptions on mainstream schools made him able to enjoy the alternative school. As such, students' criticisms of their mainstream school experiences were transformed either to *self*-criticism or to present contentment. Also, ambivalent feelings between criticism of mainstream school and criticism of self remained are eased by the following reasoning: "I did wrong and school did wrong to me. Everything turned out to be OK because I go to school now anyway."

CONCLUSION

The meanings of their drop-out and out-of-school experiences are negotiated and mediated in SGH. Drawing on SGH students' perceptions on the school and cultural practices of SGH, this study revealed the role of SGH, with particular focus on how SGH experiences stimulate reflection on their past experience. I argue that SGH contributes to pariah identity making 1) by deepening rueful memories, 2) by legitimating pariah culture. These two processes paralyze critical voices of mainstream school practices by 1) self-blaming and 2) feeling satisfied with SGH, respectively. The alternative school does not shelter itself from the mainstream value system. Alternative school students are aware that their school is a stigmatized and devalued place with inadequate facilities, low reputation, and an "abnormal" school culture. Their

awareness of the mainstream value scheme confirms their social positioning, and relegates themselves to the status of second-rate students. Most SGH students regretted and repented their disengagement from mainstream schools; however, their self-blame did not allow them back to mainstream institutions. They criticized mainstream schools, but their criticism was not strong enough to lead to policy changes; rather their criticism took the form of personal complaints. Alternative schools, leading to spatial separation or segregation, may generate a subculture where student achievement, school behaviors, aspirations, and family background within the school are homogeneous. It has been argued that mainstream schools are agents to reproduce and reinforce social inequality. Alternative schools are no exception.

According to official discourse in Korea, alternative schools promote equality by enabling dropouts to achieve mobility through affording school diplomas. However, my study demonstrates that behind this egalitarian mission, alternative schools play a part in *re*einforcing social stratification by individualizing the problem and obscuring expulsion policy of mainstream schools. Within SGH, "to educate students to be mature" means "to let them regret having dropped out of the mainstream school and accept their alternative schooler identity." This study reveals that both groups of SGH students, i.e., mature and immature students, resign themselves as pariah, and thus it leads to the conclusion that social reproduction is achieved through impeccable political manipulation of selfhood.

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